

CANADIAN JOURNAL of URBAN RESEARCH

REVUE CANADIENNE de RECHERCHE URBAINE

BOOK REVIEW

Manon Tremblay

100 Questions About Women and Politics

McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018

ISBN: 9780773555037

100 Questions About Women and Politics uses an unconventional approach to explore some of the biggest questions about women and politics. “In this book,” Tremblay writes, “I aim to provide essential information—the minimum that one should know about women’s participation in electoral politics in Canada and elsewhere in the world—in a simple, accessible style” (p. 3). The book lives up to its promise of educational outreach, and its scope, readability, and grounding in the literature are a testament to Tremblay’s more than three decades of scholarship and teaching.

The book has a satisfying encyclopedic quality and is organized as answers to a series of questions. Course instructors will recognize the questions as ones that are often asked by students, such as why Rwanda has elected so many women, or whether the media discriminates against women politicians. Other entries remind me of questions posed by journalists seeking commentary on stories about women voters or measures that might increase women’s presence in politics. The content is detailed enough to appeal to political scientists, but written so as to be accessible to non-specialists and those in other disciplines.

Originally published in French, the book was translated, updated, and expanded for a broader audience. The entries can be read in whatever order the reader chooses, but they are organized thematically into nine chapters. Chapter 1 is new to the English edition and offers a tidy synopsis of the use of gender as an analytical category. Chapters 2 to 8 are international in scope and synthesize a remarkable range of research, data, and perspectives on the right to vote and run for office (“In which countries did women first obtain the right to vote?”); electoral behaviour (“Is the electorate sexist?”); obstacles to the election of women (“Do family responsibilities really pose an obstacle to women’s involvement in politics?”); the proportion of women in parliaments (“Is there a link between democracy and the proportion of women in parliaments?”); strategies for feminizing parliaments (“What are the arguments for and against quotas?”); political representation (“Do female politicians think and act differently from male politicians?”); and representation in Cabinet (“What positions do women occupy in cabinets around the world?”). The final chapter answers many of the same questions, but with a specific focus on Canada (“How should we interpret Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s parity cabinet?”)

This book showcases Tremblay’s enviable ability to consolidate knowledge on women and politics. Her responses will satisfy those seeking dates, statistics, and trends, and several entries are peppered with interesting trivia. I learned, for example, that Ellen Fairclough served as Canadian Prime Minister for two days in February of 1958. This was a result of a now-discarded practice of requiring the most senior member of Cabinet to act on the prime minister’s behalf anytime he was away from the capital.

Tremblay goes beyond description, however, intervening at key points to provide her own perspective, which is explicitly signalled. In doing so, she skillfully navigates theoretical disputes and contradictory results in the

Canadian Journal of Urban Research, Summer 2019, Volume 28, Issue 1, pages 100-101.

Copyright © 2019 by the Institute of Urban Studies.

All rights of reproduction in any form reserved.

ISSN: 2371-0292

empirical evidence. At times, Tremblay does not provide a final answer, leaving the question open to the reader's interpretation. In a few places, I suspect that readers may find this more open-ended approach frustrating, but for me it is refreshing because it reinforces that social science is rarely about absolute conclusions. Reasonable people can disagree, and they can do so in a way that is frank, transparent, and fair. Tremblay exemplifies these qualities, which are particularly apparent in her treatment of electoral reform, quotas, parity, party discipline, and the various (and sometimes contradictory) conceptions of representation.

Because it is organized around a series of independently addressed questions, the book's central argument might not immediately be apparent. But as I dug deeper into the responses, I realized several threads are woven throughout. Chief among these is the centrality of structural explanations to the problem of women's electoral under-representation. Time and again, Tremblay returns to this theme, pointing out that the problem is not with women or even with voters, but rather with electoral institutions, political parties, and systemic disadvantage. A second theme is Tremblay's dashing of the idealistic hope that women will soon—or even ever—achieve parity in representation. In a number of her responses, she reinforces the idea that “there is no law called ‘natural increase in the number of women parliamentarians’” (p. 87). If women's electoral representation is to permanently increase, structural change is needed.

Of course, no book can do everything, and Tremblay clearly demarcates her scope. The focus is largely on formal political participation, elections, and representation, which are Tremblay's main areas of expertise. National and sub-national legislatures are dealt with the most comprehensively, although there is some discussion of municipal politics. To the extent that public policy issues are addressed, this is largely in relation to questions about substantive representation. Moreover, as the book's title suggests, the emphasis is primarily on women, with less discussion of masculinity or the experiences of men in politics.

In focusing on the category of “woman,” Tremblay takes pains to avoid essentialism. She discusses intersectionality and non-binary conceptions of gender. There are entries on lesbians and Indigenous women. Tremblay explicitly rejects universalist conceptions of womanhood but, even still, universalist definitions creep in, particularly in entries on the extension of the franchise and the achievement of various political milestones where a privileging of white women's experiences is acknowledged. I sympathize with the challenge, particularly in a book whose stated aim is simplify social and political phenomenon, but it is a feature of the analysis that some might find wanting.

The index is thorough, and Tremblay helpfully cross-references related entries, allowing readers to connect overarching themes. Each response ends with a concise bibliography of related readings. There is some repetition between entries, as Tremblay points out in the introduction, and while this might ordinarily be considered a weakness, it is defensible given the author's objective of allowing readers to consult entries on an as-needed basis.

One feature I longed for is a list of all 100 questions at the beginning of the book. This would permit readers to more easily access the questions to which they most need answers. A second feature that some readers might appreciate is a glossary of key definitions, or a clear demarcation in the index of the pages on which such definitions are provided. Terms like critical mass, feminization rate, glass ceilings, and “pink portfolios,” which appear in several places could be flagged. That said, these are small tweaks, aimed only at improving the ease with which readers can access the sheer volume of information amassed in this collection. The content itself is solid.

100 Questions About Women and Politics is primarily a synthesis of existing knowledge and research, but Tremblay manages to both satisfy and pique the reader's curiosity. She does this by balancing her provision of a practical thematic primer with candid reflection on the questions that remain unresolved. As a result, the book signals a range of topics to which future research could turn. This collection calls to mind the maxim that still waters run deep. That is, Tremblay begins with a simple premise—to answer a few questions about women and politics—but what she delivers is a comprehensive examination of an entire field of knowledge. This is a superb reference for anyone interested in women and politics.

Erin Tolley
Department of Political Science
University of Toronto